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ABSTRACT

Facing an increasingly heterogeneous society, teachers need to be communicators. Most of human communication is nonverbal, but nonverbal behaviors are largely culture-bound. Teachers' sensitivity and understanding of students' nonverbal behaviors and their competence in sending correct nonverbal messages can make a difference in classroom interactions. Native Americans' communication style is influenced by values that emphasize humility, respect for elders, learning through storytelling, intuitiveness, and concern for group harmony. Six Cherokee, Navajo, and Hopi educators in the public schools or university were interviewed about Native American nonverbal behaviors. In their own behaviors and their comments, interviewees indicated the appropriateness of the following behaviors: soft talk; gentle handshake; minimal eye contact, especially with elders; little facial display of emotion; most facial movement around the eyes; varying expectations as to personal distance; and intuitive time-related behaviors. Offers suggestions for increasing awareness of cultural differences among teachers and students. (SV)

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Beyond the Language: Native Americans' Nonverbal Communication

by

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Abstract

Beyond the Language: Native Americans' Nonverbal Communication

Facing the increasing heterogeneous society, teachers need to be communicators. Most of the human communication that occurs is nonverbal communication. The purpose of this study is to understand nonverbal communication in the categories of: eye contact, facial expression, interpersonal spacing, use of time, etc. of Navajo, Cherokee, and Hopi Indians in Northern Arizona. The research methods including literature review, observation in reservation, and in depth interview with tribal Indians. Suggestions for communicating with Native Americans are discussed.

Beyond the Language: Native Americans' Nonverbal Communication

by

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I. Introduction

The process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society (Ahlquist, 1992). Facing an increasingly heterogeneous society, teachers need to be communicators. In the U. S. people from diverse backgrounds and religions meet. These encounters have changed all groups. Each group became transformed in a way where each is part of the other's world. Knowledge of intercultural communication can aid in solving problems before they arise. Many problems can be avoided by understanding the components of intercultural communication.

In spite of the overwhelming verbal communication, Richmond & McCrokey (1992) contend that most of the human communication that occurs is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication is an extremely complex process and one that has an important impact in areas of academic, business, professional. political and social organization (Klopf, 1991). The ambiguity and complexity of nonverbal behavior may repeat, contradict, or complement messages among parties involved.

Nonverbal behaviors are largely culture bound. Very few people have any formal instruction in understanding nonverbal communication and most are prone to make mistakes in producing or

interpreting one or more of the categories of nonverbal behaviors: eye contact, facial expression, gesture, interpersonal spacing, use of time, etc. These nonverbal differences are most likely to cause problems between people with different cultural backgrounds. Teachers play significant roles in students' learning. Their sensitivity and understanding of students' nonverbal behaviors and their competence in sending correct nonverbal messages can make a difference in the interaction of classroom settings. Nonverbal communication is especially important to understand native Americans.

There are more than 500 American Indian tribes. These tribes were persistent in maintaining their separate identities. These groups may all look alike, but beneath the surface there lie manifold differences in structuring of time, space, and relationships. Tribes also vary in the extent to which they control their own school systems. Little research has been done on how much intertribal variation occurs in the nonverbal practice of conversational etiquette (Greenbaum, 1983). The purpose of this study is to understand nonverbal communication of Native Americans in the state of Arizona. Results from the study may provide information for educators to work effectively with Native American students.

II. The Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

Intercultural communication is defined as communication that allows one to approximate another's meanings. Nonverbal communication transmits information that is understood by another person. By understanding intercultural communication one may be able to avoid unintentional conflict and violence; one may recognize

the conflict when it occurs; and one may learn more about self by trying to perceive and comprehend alternative meanings. Wolfgang (1979) described the characteristics of nonverbal communication as:

1. Nonverbal communication normally operates outside of the awareness level and is hard to manipulate or falsify;
2. Nonverbal communication carries greater impact than words, particularly in revealing emotions;
3. Nonverbal communication can be used as an index of assimilation; and
4. Nonverbal communication also can be used for stereotyping others, for example, the English may be described as "cold", Italians as "emotional".

With the functions and characteristics of nonverbal communication, teaching in a multicultural classroom can be a big challenge.

III. Nonverbal Communication and Native Americans' Learning

Studies have demonstrated nonverbal behaviors influence learning and classroom interaction (Greenbaum, 1983; 1985). Greenbaum's (1983) study pointed out behaviors such as less talking, low voice tones, and averted gaze during conversation hinder students in the interacting and learning process.

Several Native American values have significant impact on their communication style. The Native American emphasis on personal humility, respect for elders, learning through story telling or legends, intuitiveness, preference for a low-key profile, concern for group harmony, having few and flexible rules, and simplifying

problems. These values directly influence communication style (Richardson, 1981). The Cherokee believe that the ways in which people relate to each other verbally or nonverbally are a form of moral transaction. Hence, how something is said is as important as what is said. The Sioux children seem to communicate with each other excitedly and more frequently in the absence of an adult. (Dumont, 1985).

Native American children focus on action and visual elements related to words. John (1985) reported Navajo children may be attentive to the teachers' voice, but they are likely to watch his or her action. Philips (1993) summarized that Indian students are perceived and defined by their teachers as inattentive, because:

1. Indian children convey attention in different ways than Anglo children and the former may be attending when the teachers think they are not;
2. They are more involved with and interested in interaction with their classmates rather than the teachers.

The interactions between teachers and Indian students influence the effectiveness of teaching. These studies mentioned suggest the importance of understanding of Indian students' nonverbal behaviors.

IV. Procedures and Findings

I had the opportunity to observe and interview Cherokee, Navajo, and Hopi Indians in Arizona during the summer of 1993. People that I interviewed are all professionals and actively involved in different educational settings in the public schools or in the University in Arizona. Four males and two females were interviewed

for at least two hours at every meeting. After talking with them I discovered some of their wisdom and beliefs which I believe can help people to get along better. Each interviewee used the tern "nation" rather than "tribe". The respondents' soft talk and gentle handshakes reveal their humbleness and friendliness. The important findings of this study are:

A. Eye Contact

Every one of my respondents gazed at the table or looked at their hands when listening to my questions. There were only a few seconds that their eyes met mine. They still consider looking directly into other people's eyes is not appropriate, especially to the elders. Applying this concept to classroom settings, they mentioned most Indian students tend to look in the teachers' direction rather than at the teacher.

B. Facial Expression

They did not show extreme excitement or dismay when they were talking. There was less movement in the lower part of the face and more movement in the area around the eyes. Some of them looked other directions rather than in the direction I was sitting. When they expressed disapproval, they used "a look"; "tight lips"; and "a tone of voice". However, for approval, "smile" and "head nodding" seem to be common.

C. Distance

Every one of my respondents expressed that in their culture distance between individuals was varied. One mentioned no physical touch among his tribe; one mentioned the expectations of space between males and females was different, the average distance is

about a length of a hand; and one reported in private they are close to each other, and in public they have hugging circles in gathering activity.

D. Time

I noticed some interviewees wore watches but some did not. When answering about the concept of time, one indicated he used the senses to tell time; one said he goes by rhythm; some mentioned they used the positions of the sun. They all expressed that they were able to accommodate the western time if they need to. When they were with their people they go by nature's time.

There are some taboos when interacting with Indians. One mentioned one should not stare at others' eyes, and one should not be too direct when talking to other persons. One reported one should not walk around in their resident area without an escort from their tribe; and all mentioned no strong hand shakes and no praise if you are not a close friend.

V. Conclusions and Suggestions

Behaviors usually speak louder than words. I was deeply moved when every one of my respondents expressed the unpleasant memories in boarding schools and the feelings of being marginal persons. They did not look at me but the lower voices and miserable eye expressions conveyed their bitter memories. More understanding and learning to live with differences is an important lesson every one of us need to learn.

Though multicultural education has been adapted and implemented in teacher education for almost two decades, many diverse groups that make up our country are persistent in

maintaining their separate identities. The challenge to educators is to be sensitive to the diverse student population, and be understanding of school-related behaviors which impact the learning process.

The following suggestions may increase understanding of diversity and provide opportunity equity in classroom settings:

1. Increase personal contact between teachers and students. Teachers need to demonstrate sensitivity and equity accompany teaching and learning activities. This will enhance the knowledge of different cultures.
2. Provide early supervised field experiences for students in diverse ethnic settings. The early meaningful experiences with diverse groups may help overcome misconceptions and fears when one is around diverse groups.
3. Involve both teachers and students in community activities. The interactions may increase tolerance to differences and provide opportunities for diverse groups to contribute wisdom and share experiences.
4. Generate trust and respect relationships between diverse groups by allowing groups to solve problems in a collaborative way. This relationship may increase appreciation of differences among teachers and students.
5. Communicate formally and informally among diverse group of students. Analyze the patterns of oral and non-verbal communication between students to increase the involvement of students in the learning process. This communication can promote values of social justice in classrooms.

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